STARBLAZER

FANTASY FICTION IN PICTURES No. 192

26p

THE FACE OF EVIL

ALSO ON SALE THIS MONTH . . .

MAKE SURE YOU DON'T MISS STARBLAZER! ORDER YOUR COPY BY HANDING THIS COUPON INTO YOUR NEWSAGENT . . .

PLEASE RESERVE BOTH STARBLAZERS FOR ME.

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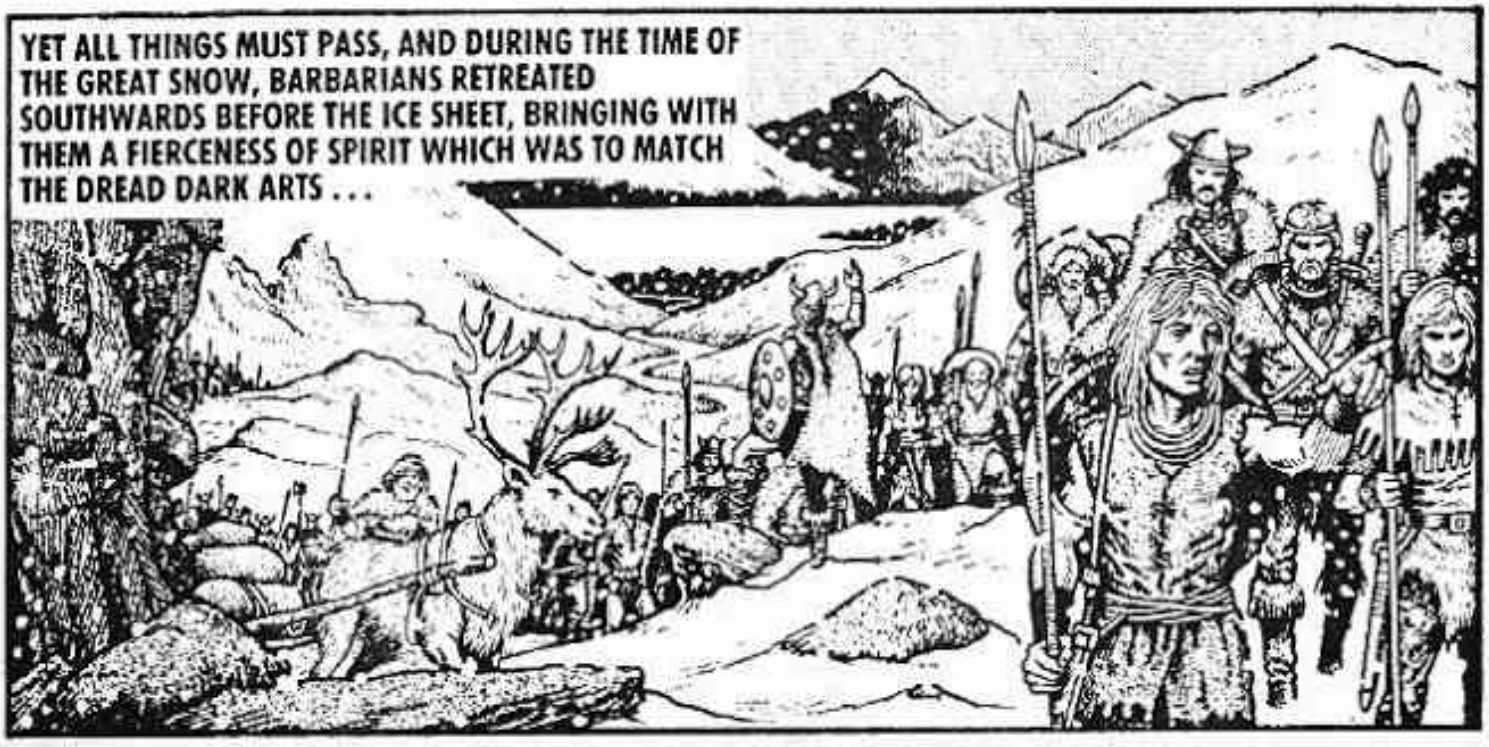
TO THE NEWSAGENT — Both STARBLAZERS are on sale the last TUESDAY of each month.

If you do not wish to cut up your STARBLAZER, copy out the above coupon on a piece of paper and hand it to your newsagent.

FACE OF EVIL
DO OUR BIDDING, NAGAAL!
YONDER LIES THE FORTRESS OF THOSE WHO DARE TO DEFY US, DEMON. DESTROY THOSE WHO DOUBT OUR POWER!
THERE IS A TIME IN PRE-HISTORY WHEN THIS LAND WAS RULED BY SORCERY. FROM THEIR SUBTERRANEAN LAIRS, EVIL MAGICIANS CAST SINISTER SPELLS . . .

. . . CONJURING FORTH DREAD CREATURES TO STALK A COUNTRY GRIPPED IN SUPERSTITIOUS TERROR. WARRIORS WERE HELPLESS AGAINST THOSE FIENDS.

SOME SHAPED THE AFFAIRS OF MEN IN OTHER WAYS . . .
HA! YOU WERE FOOLISH ENOUGH TO DREAM OF AN END TO WAR. YET I DECREE THE TWO MOST POWERFUL TRIBES OF THE COUNTRY ARE DOOMED TO DESTROY EACH OTHER, THUS POSING NO FURTHER THREAT TO ME.


YET ALL THINGS MUST PASS, AND DURING THE TIME OF THE GREAT SNOW, BARBARIANS RETREATED SOUTHWARDS BEFORE THE ICE SHEET, BRINGING WITH THEM A FIERCENESS OF SPIRIT WHICH WAS TO MATCH THE DREAD DARK ARTS . . .

. . . A TITANIC STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL BEGAN. SWORD AGAINST SORCERY — MUSCLE BATTLING MAGIC . . .

. . . AND PEACE CAME.
. . . UNTIL THE LAND WAS RID OF THE DARK ONES. THAT IS OUR HISTORY, JAI. THE BLOOD OF THE BARBARIANS FLOWS IN OUR VEINS — YET, IN YOUR CASE, I HAVE CAUSE TO WONDER AT TIMES!

JAI'S FAMILY WERE OF THE WARRIOR CASTE, AND HE HAD MANY YEARS OF INSTRUCTION TO UNDERGO BY MEN SUCH AS KOBOR —
THE SPOOR IS FRESH, MASTER KOBOR. SHOULD WE—
SILENCE, DOLT! USE YOUR EARS, NOT YOUR MOUTH! DO YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING OF WHAT I'VE TAUGHT YOU?

AT THAT MOMENT A LARGE, POWERFUL ANIMAL WAS READYING ITSELF FOR A DEADLY CHARGE.
M-MY LANCE IS READY. WE ARE CLOSING ON THE BEAST.
I FEAR IT IS CLOSING ON US, HALF-WIT. THE CUNNING BRUTE HAS MANY TRICKS TO PLAY ON YOU.

SURE ENOUGH, AWARE IT WAS BEING TRACKED, THE BOAR HAD DOUBLED BACK AND NOW SPRUNG ITS AMBUSH.
MASTER? MASTER!
STAND FIRM, LAD. HE'S YOURS.

PANIC AND RUN AND YOU'LL CEASE YOUR TRAINING IMMEDIATELY. DON'T FAIL BOY!
AARRGH!
BUT—

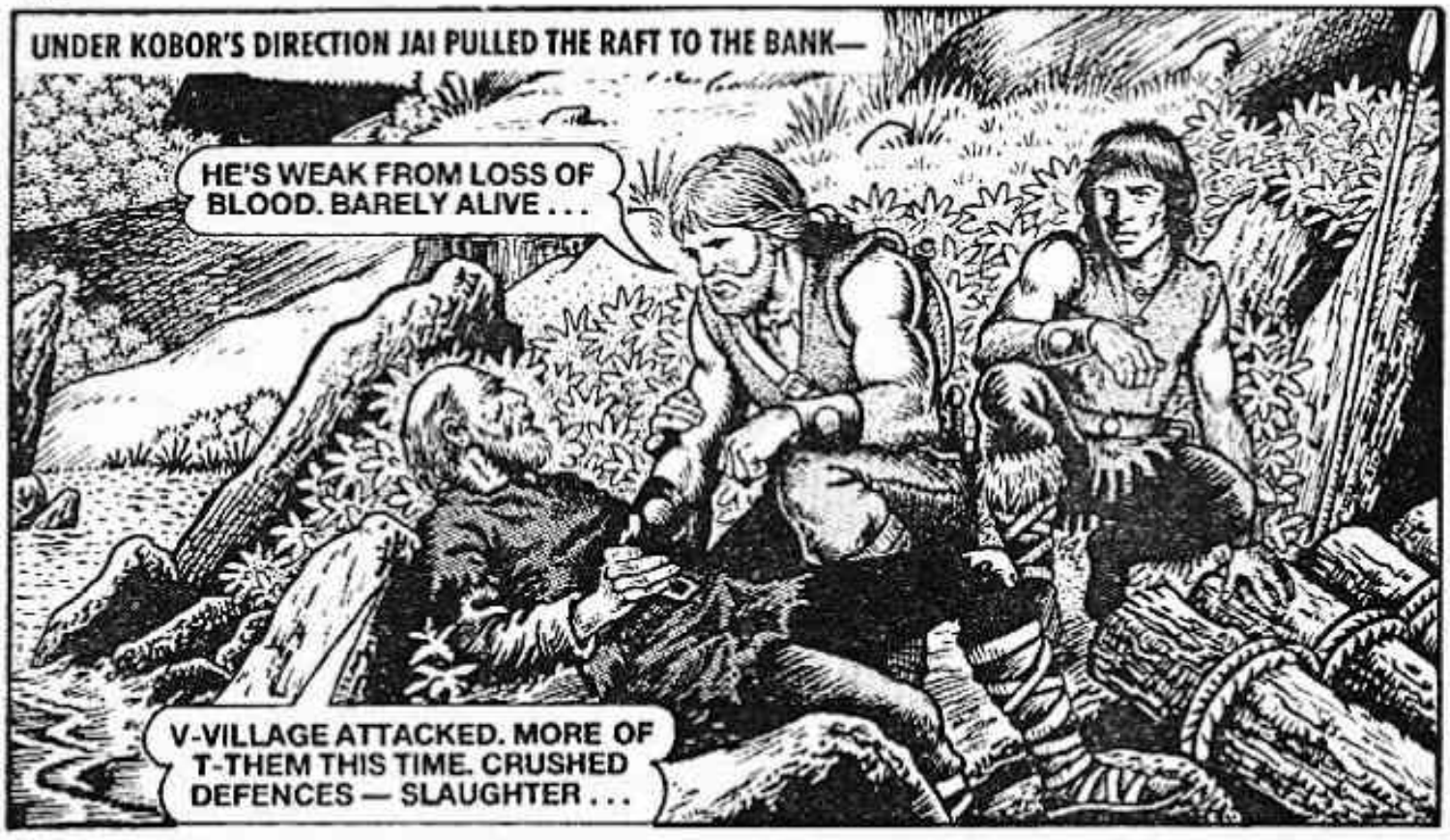
EVEN AS THE BOY CRASHED TO THE GROUND THE BEAST WAS SWERVING ROUND TO FINISH HIM.
CAN'T REACH SPEAR. I'M DOOMED, UNLESS . . .

JAI ROLLED AWAY FROM THE BEAST, BUT—
HELP!

OH, NO . . . O . . . O . . . O!

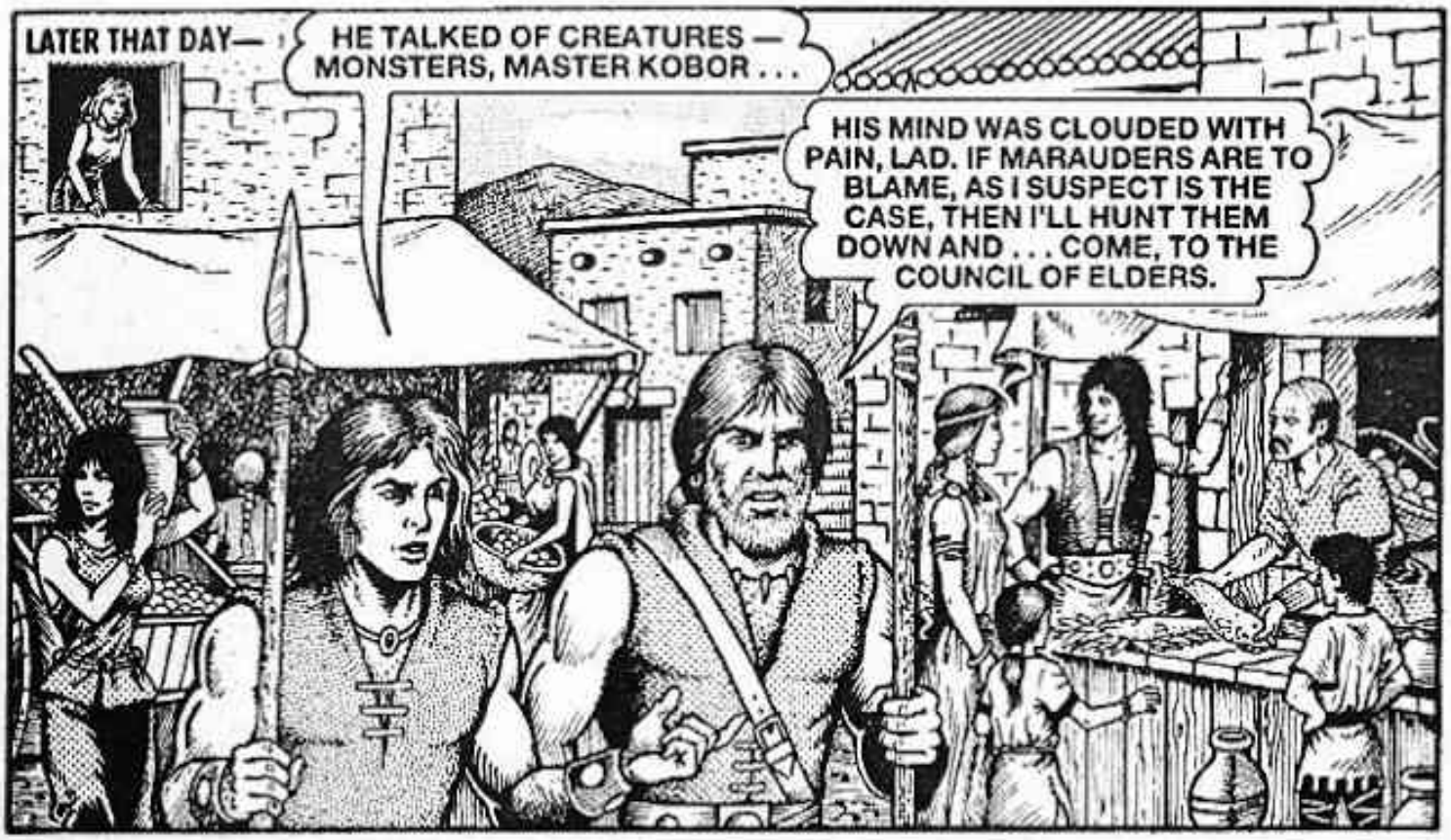
JAI PLUNGED INTO THE ICE-COLD WATER—

JAI STRUGGLED TO THE BANK—
WHY DIDN'T YOU HELP ME, MASTER?
I'M YOUR TUTOR, NOT YOUR NURSEMAID, BOY. BESIDES, I HAVE NO QUARREL WITH THE BEAST. IT WAS A TEST FOR YOU, NOT ME.
I COULD HAVE BEEN KILLED!
AS JAI SULKED, KOBOR'S ALERT EYES HAD SPOTTED SOMETHING.
PAH! WHY WOULD THE GREAT BOAR DO THAT? HE WOULD NOT SULLY HIS REPUTATION BY KILLING CHILDREN. HOLD HARD, BOY, . . . SOMETHING IS AMISS.


UNDER KOBOR'S DIRECTION JAI PULLED THE RAFT TO THE BANK—
HE'S WEAK FROM LOSS OF BLOOD. BARELY ALIVE . . .
V-VILLAGE ATTACKED. MORE OF T-THEM THIS TIME. CRUSHED DEFENCES — SLAUGHTER . . .

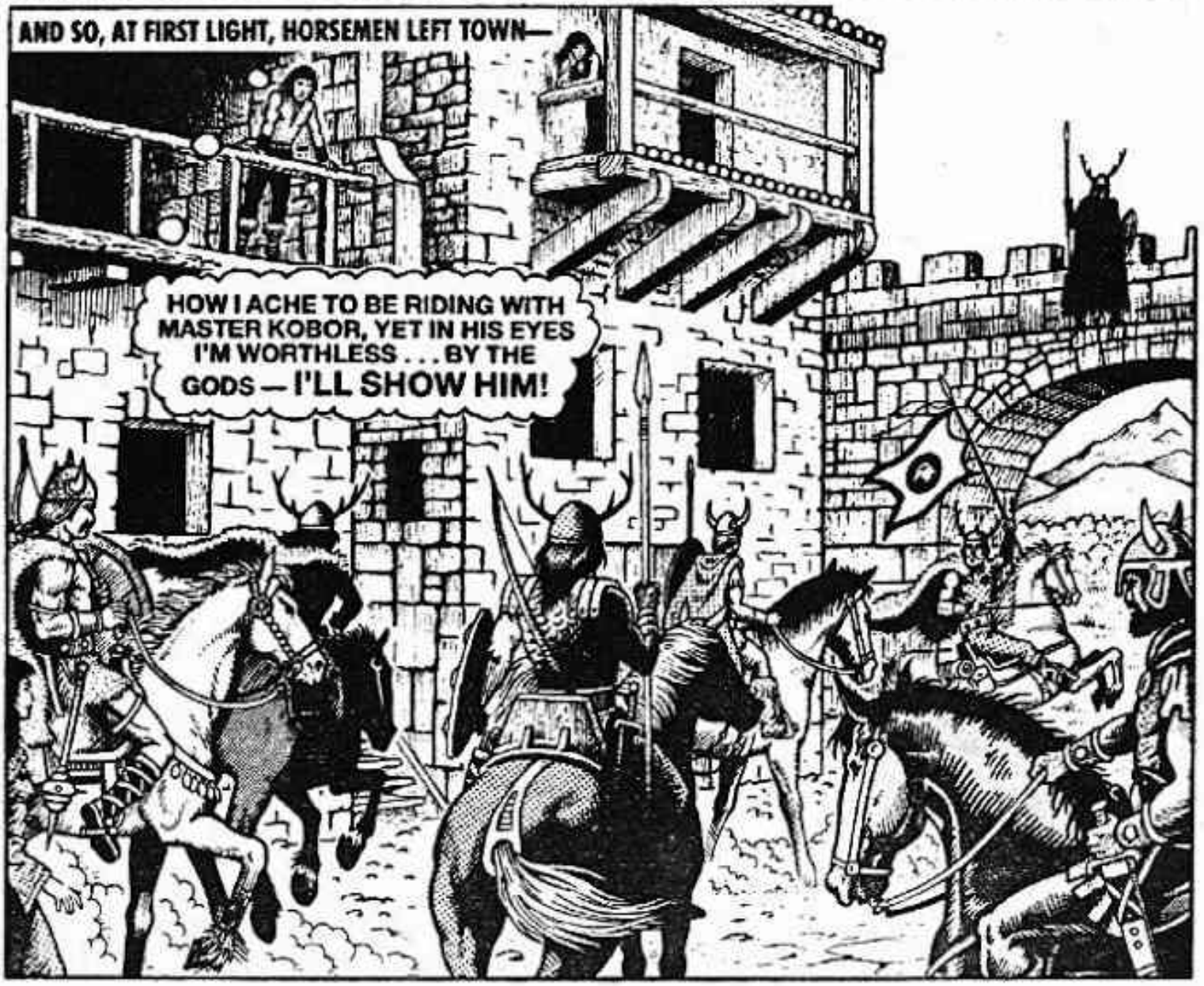
THE MAN'S FACE WAS A MASK OF TERROR.
WHO ATTACKED YOU?
THE — THE CREATURES. NIGHTMARE CREATURES . . .

BUT THE MAN WAS BEYOND HELP—
HE'S OF THE KHITON FISHERFOLK FROM THE UPPER REACHES OF THE RIVER. WE MUST INVESTIGATE.


LATER THAT DAY—
HE TALKED OF CREATURES — MONSTERS, MASTER KOBOR . . .
HIS MIND WAS CLOUDED WITH PAIN, LAD. IF MARAUDERS ARE TO BLAME, AS I SUSPECT IS THE CASE, THEN I'LL HUNT THEM DOWN AND . . . COME, TO THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS.

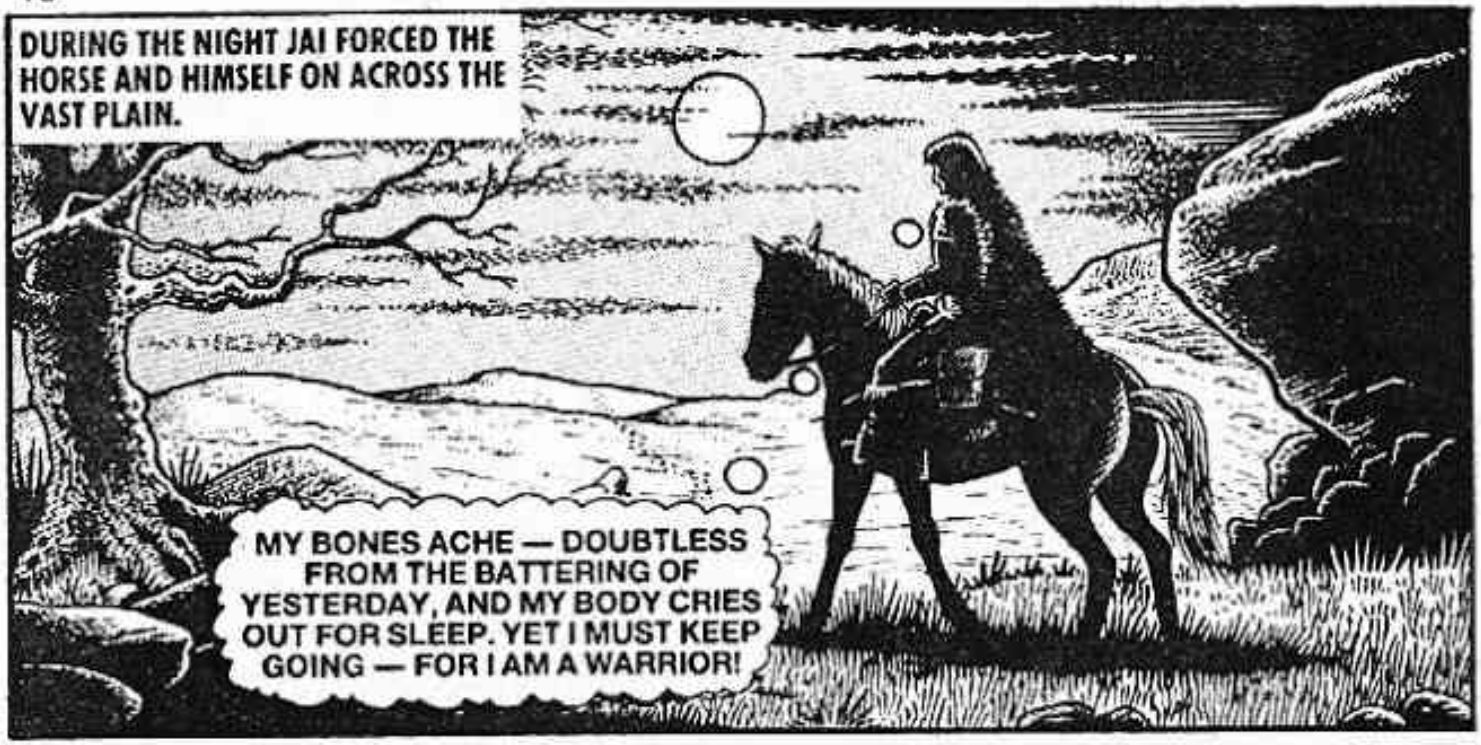
AND—
THE VILLAGE OF KHITON IS THREE DAY'S RIDE FROM HERE. WE VALUE THEIR TRADE AND FRIENDSHIP. TAKE A COMPANY OF THE GUARD, KOBOR. DEPART AT FIRST LIGHT.

I'LL BE READY WITH THE REST OF THEM, MASTER KOBOR.
NO, LAD. THIS IS MAN'S WORK! YOU HAVE FAR TO GO TO EARN THE PRIZED HELMET OF THE GUARD — THE GREAT BOAR SHOWED THAT TODAY. BEGONE!


AND SO, AT FIRST LIGHT, HORSEMEN LEFT TOWN—
HOW I ACHE TO BE RIDING WITH MASTER KOBOR, YET IN HIS EYES I'M WORTHLESS . . . BY THE GODS — I'LL SHOW HIM!

JAI RAN TO THE STABLES GATHERING SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT ON THE WAY, AND—
THEY'VE A GOOD START AND THEIR HORSES ARE SWIFTER, BUT MY SKILLS AS A TRACKER HAVE AT TIMES EARNED MASTER KOBOR'S BEGRUDGING PRAISE. NOW THEY WILL KEEP ME DOGGING HIS HEELS.

LATER—
THEY CROSSED THE RIVER HERE AND YONDER LIES THE PLAIN OF ANNUIN. THEIR PASSING WILL LEAVE A CLEAR MARK WHICH I CAN FOLLOW WITH EASE, EVEN BY MOONLIGHT.

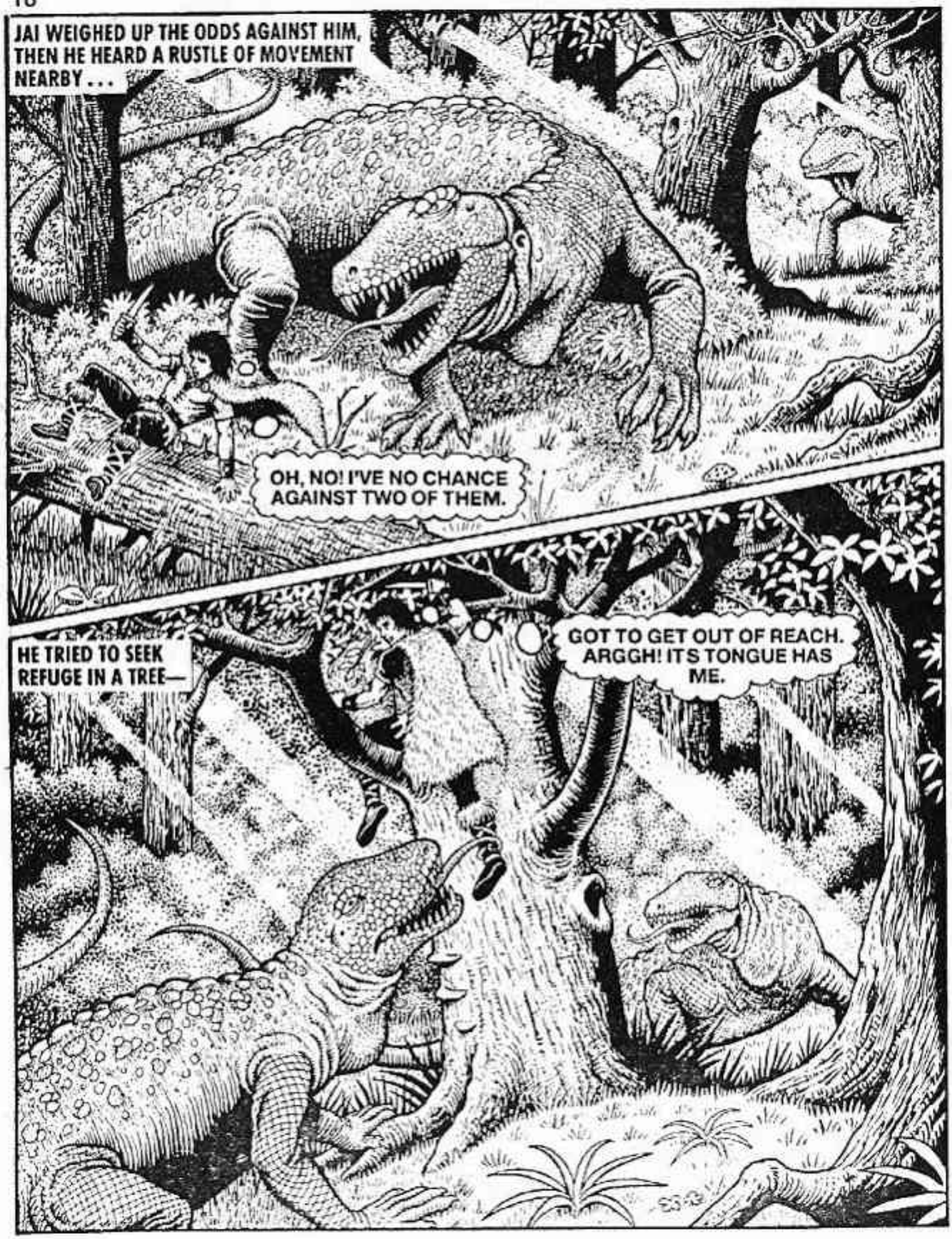

DURING THE NIGHT JAI FORCED THE HORSE AND HIMSELF ON ACROSS THE VAST PLAIN.
MY BONES ACHE — DOUBTLESS FROM THE BATTERING OF YESTERDAY, AND MY BODY CRIES OUT FOR SLEEP. YET I MUST KEEP GOING — FOR I AM A WARRIOR!

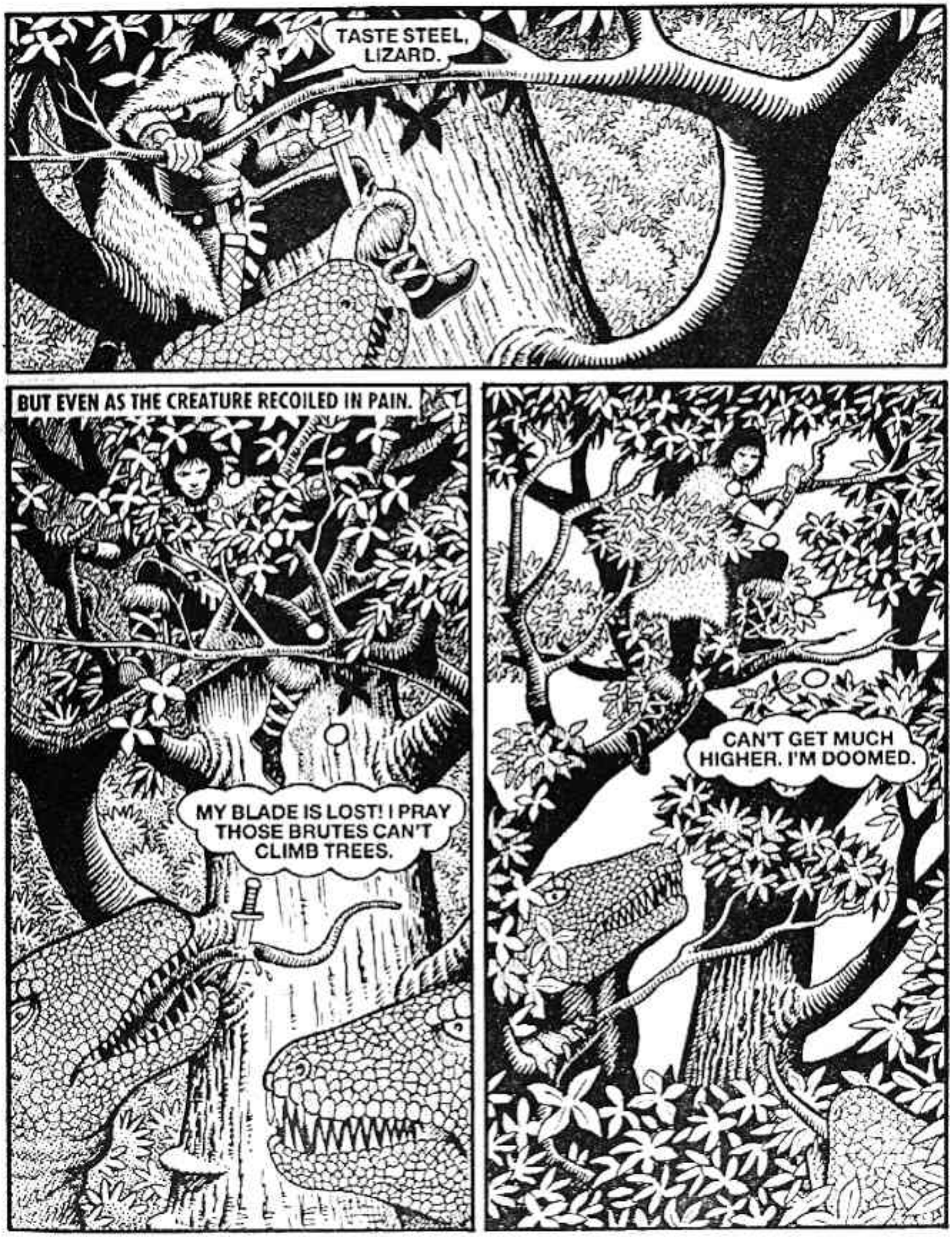
FINALLY JAI'S TENACITY WAS REWARDED. EARLY THE NEXT DAY . . .
THE REMAINS OF A CAMPFIRE— AND THERE THEY ARE!

JAI MANAGED TO KEEP THE RIDERS IN SIGHT UNTIL THE PLAIN GAVE WAY TO A MIGHTY FOREST.
EASY, GIRL! I DON'T LIKE THIS PLACE ANY MORE THAN YOU DO.

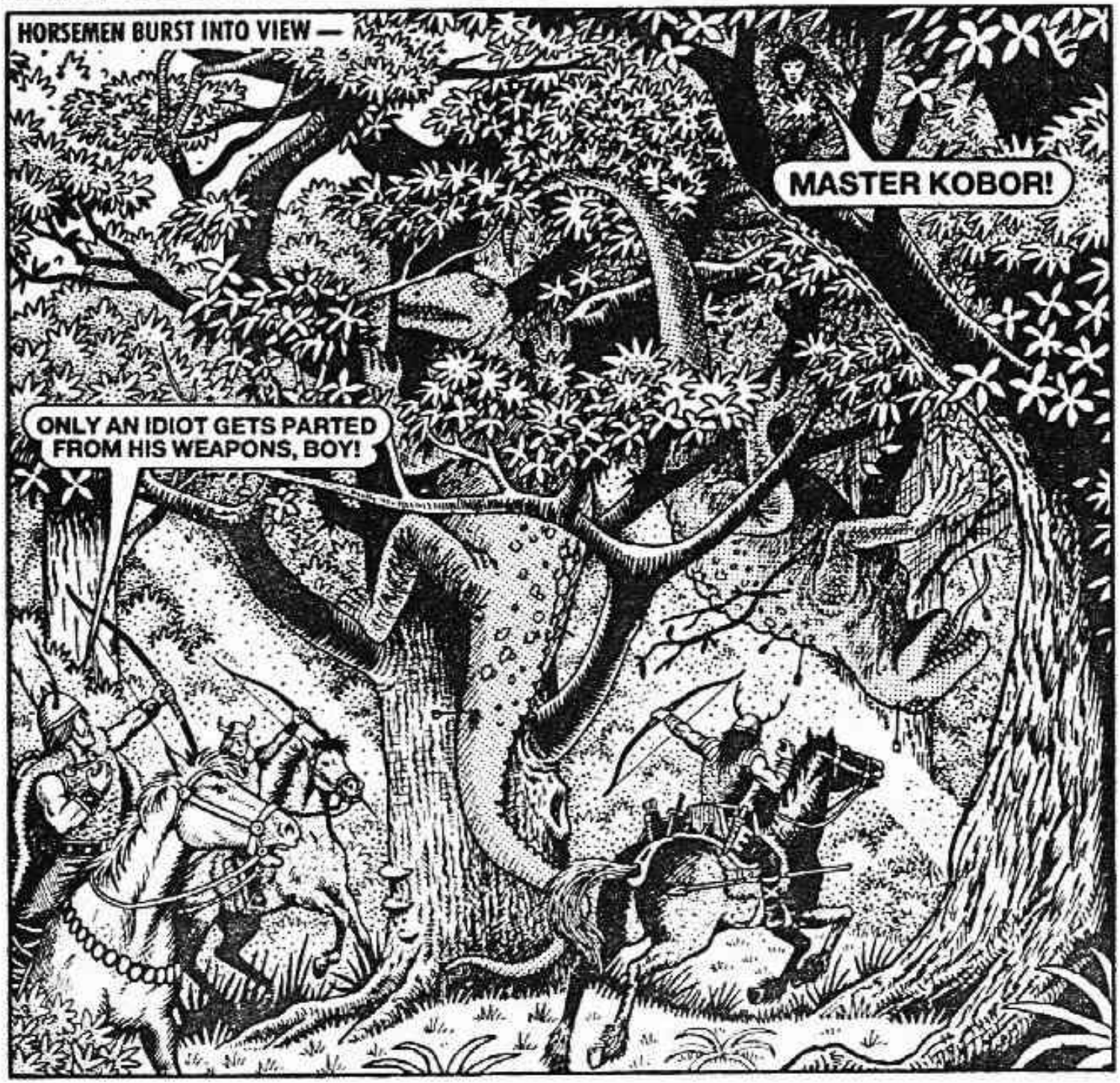
SUDDENLY—
AAAAH!

JAI'S HORSE BOLTED AS THE CREATURE ADVANCED, TAKING WITH IT ALL HIS WEAPONS.
MY BOW — SWORD — WEAPONS ON THE HORSE. ALL I HAVE IS THIS . . . AGAINST THAT!


JAI WEIGHED UP THE ODDS AGAINST HIM, THEN HE HEARD A RUSTLE OF MOVEMENT NEARBY . . .
OH, NO! I'VE NO CHANCE AGAINST TWO OF THEM.
HE TRIED TO SEEK REFUGE IN A TREE—
GOT TO GET OUT OF REACH. ARGGH! ITS TONGUE HAS ME.


TASTE STEEL, LIZARD.
BUT EVEN AS THE CREATURE RECOILED IN PAIN.
MY BLADE IS LOST! I PRAY THOSE BRUTES CAN'T CLIMB TREES.
CAN'T GET MUCH HIGHER. I'M DOOMED.

SUDDENLY —
WHAT THE . . .?


HORSEMEN BURST INTO VIEW —
MASTER KOBOR!
ONLY AN IDIOT GETS PARTED FROM HIS WEAPONS, BOY!

DOES A FUTURE WARRIOR COWER UP A TREE LIKE A CHITTERING RAT?

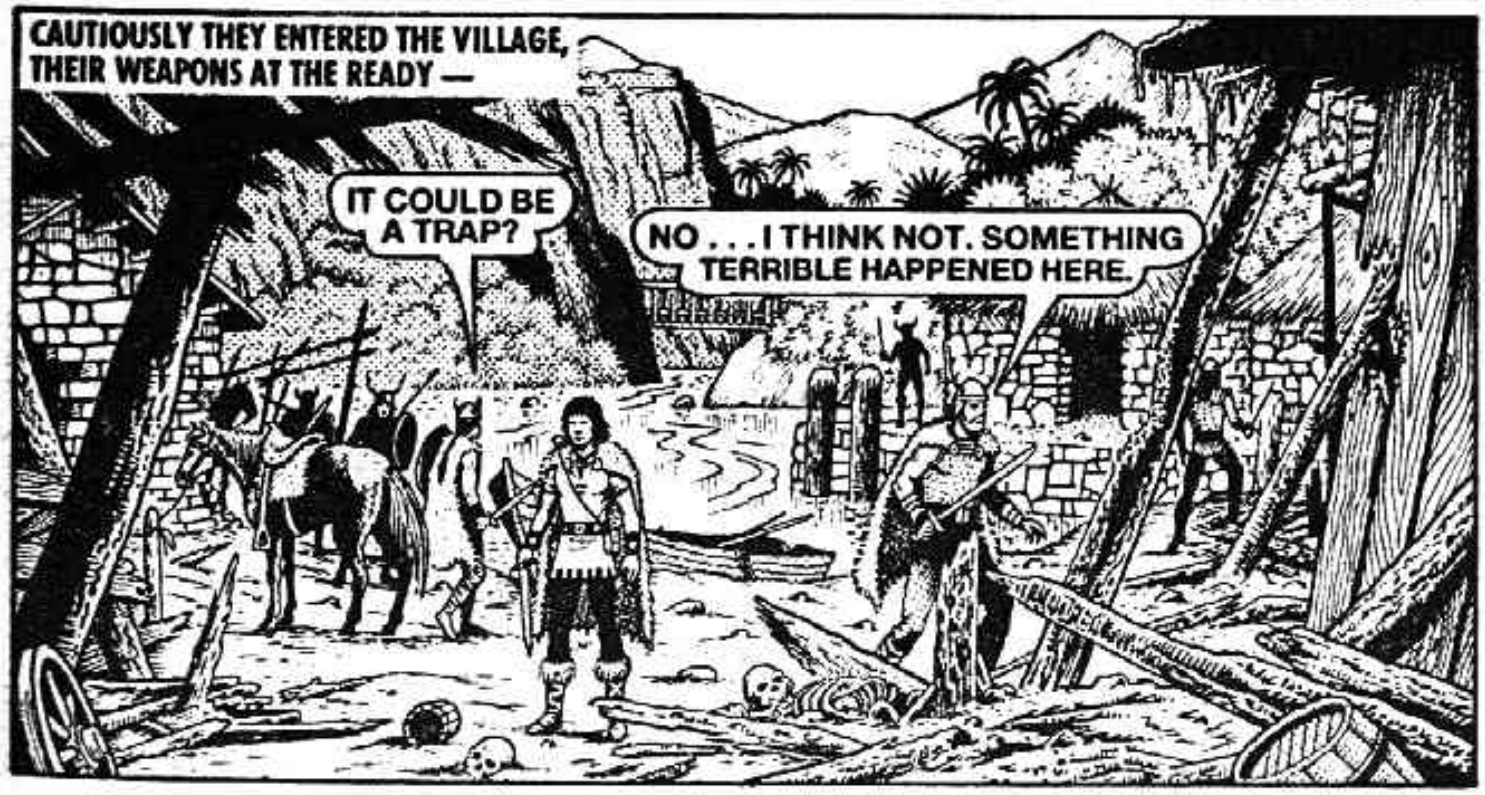
SHEEPISHLY JAI DESCENDED —
THE MOMENT YOUR EXCUSE FOR A HORSE CAME AMONGST US I REALISED YOU WERE IN TROUBLE. LEAVE HIM TO HIS WELL-DESERVED FATE, I SAID, BUT —
YOU KNEW I WAS FOLLOWING YOU, MASTER KOBOR? BUT HOW?

MY SUSPICIONS WERE CONFIRMED THIS MORNING AS I SPIED YOU ACROSS THE PLAIN OF ANNUIN. YOU HAVE ALL THE GUILE OF A TOAD. NOW YOU MUST RETURN HOME.
WITH GREAT RESPECT, NO, MASTER KOBOR. I INTEND TO PROVE MY WORTH EVEN IF I HAVE TO CONTINUE FOLLOWING YOU AT A DISTANCE.

YOU'RE DETERMINED TO GET YOURSELF KILLED, EH, BOY? SO BE IT. ONWARD!
HA, THE BOY HAS SPIRIT, IF NOTHING ELSE!

THE NEXT DAY THE RIDERS BREASTED A HILL OVERLOOKING THE VILLAGE OF KHITON . . .

THE RIVER, AND BEYOND THE UNKNOWN TERRITORIES NE'ER VENTURED INTO BY THE LIKES OF US.
IT'S SO QUIET! THERE'S NO SMOKE FROM COOKING FIRES — NO CRAFT ON THE RIVER. THOSE MURDERING FIENDS WILL PAY!


CAUTIOUSLY THEY ENTERED THE VILLAGE, THEIR WEAPONS AT THE READY —
IT COULD BE A TRAP?
NO . . . I THINK NOT. SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENED HERE.

I SENSE THE PRESENCE OF A GREAT EVIL HERE. CLOSE . . . SO VERY CLOSE . . .

AT THAT MOMENT, NEARBY —
AIEEEE!

THE OTHERS RUSHED TO THE AID OF THEIR COMRADE —
BY THE GODS! WHAT MANNER OF A CREATURE IS IT?
STAND ASIDE!

SHAFT AFTER SHAFT PENETRATED THE AWESOME, SLITHERING MASS, BUT HAD NO APPARENT EFFECT.
IT DOESN'T EVEN FALTER! MY ARROWS ARE USELESS.
THEN LET'S SEE HOW IT LIKES MY BLADE.

HA! YOU BLEED AFTER ALL!

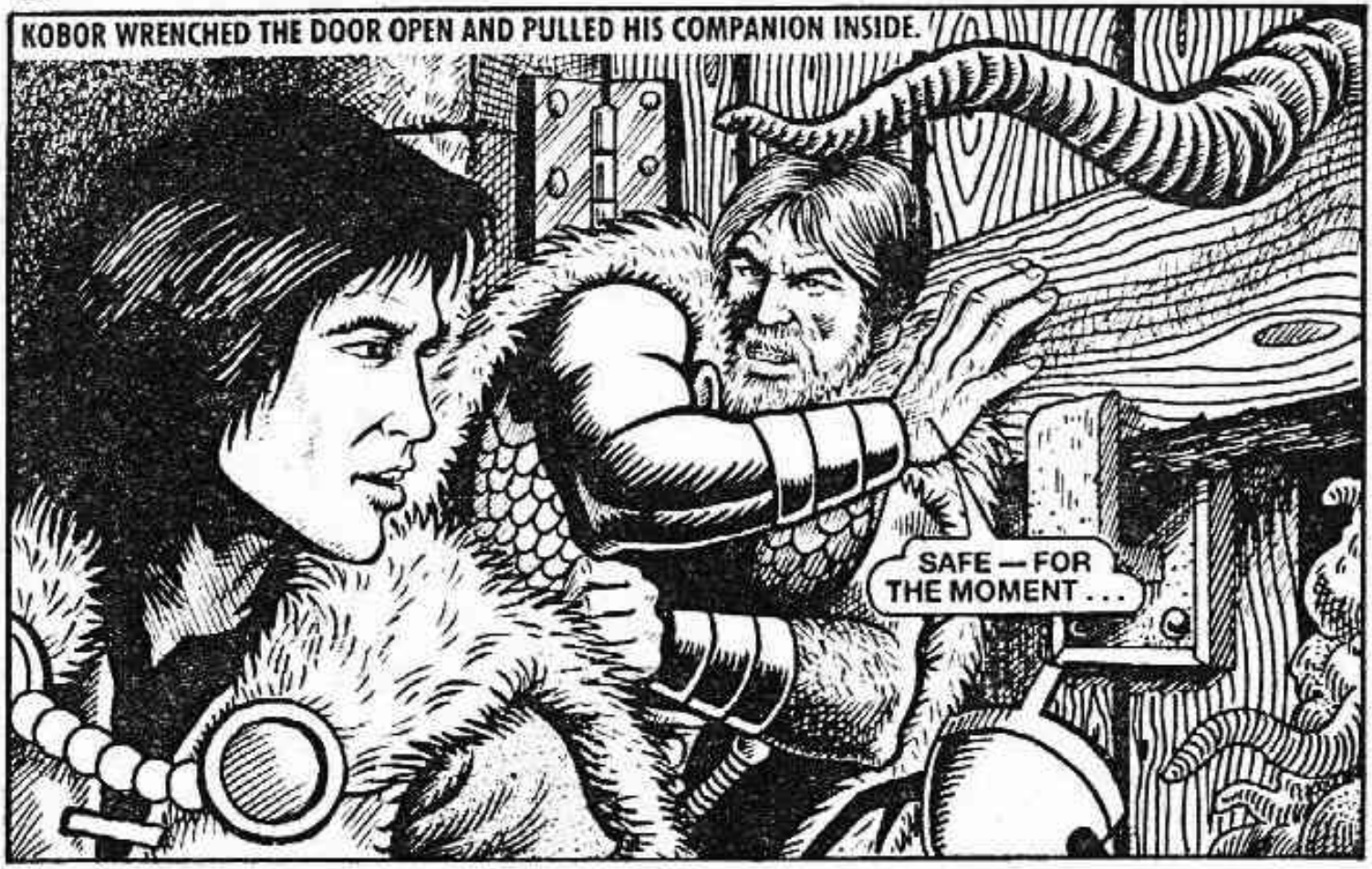
BUT WITHIN SECONDS, THE FOUL BLOOD OF THE CREATURE WAS AT WORK . . .
BURNING ME . . . AIEEEEE.
GET BACK!

BLINDED, THE WARRIOR STUMBLED WITHIN THE REACH OF THE ADVANCING MONSTER.
THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN DO. BACK TO THE HORSES.

EVEN AS THEY TURNED TO FLEE . . .
LOOK OUT!

KOBOR AND JAI SPED THROUGH THE VILLAGE.
IT WAS A TRAP. NEVER HAVE I FELT SO HELPLESS.
THE BRIDGE! IT IS OUR ONLY AVENUE OF ESCAPE.

THEY SPRINTED ACROSS THE BRIDGE TO BE CONFRONTED BY A STRANGE DOOR.
EVIL FILLS THE AIR . . . SMOTHERING ME . . .


KOBOR WRENCHED THE DOOR OPEN AND PULLED HIS COMPANION INSIDE.
SAFE — FOR THE MOMENT . . .

AIDED BY THE LUMINOSITY OF THE WALLS, THEY LOST NO TIME IN EXPLORING.
IT IS A SACRED PLACE. A VAULT NO DOUBT CONTAINING THE DEAD OF MANY GENERATIONS OF A PEOPLE NOW UTTERLY DESTROYED BY THOSE CREATURES.
THE ROOF DROPS DOWN TO NOTHING BACK THERE. WE'RE TRAPPED.

BUT AS THEY EXAMINED THE FAR WALL MORE CLOSELY . . .
THERE IS AN OPENING. TOO NARROW FOR ME, BOY, BUT NO PROBLEM FOR A SKINNY WRETCH LIKE YOU. GET TO IT!
NO! MY PLACE IS BY YOUR SIDE. I'LL STAY AND FIGHT.

KOBOR'S EYES BLAZED AS HE GRABBED JAI AND SHOOK HIM.
BOY . . . OUR PEOPLE MUST BE WARNED, AND IF THERE IS A WAY OUT OF HERE, YOU MUST FIND IT.

A WARRIOR HAS TO KNOW WHEN TO RUN RATHER THAN FIGHT. LEARN MY FINAL LESSON WELL. GO, AND MAY THE GODS BE WITH YOU.

MOMENTS LATER THE DOOR FINALLY CRUMBLED —
COME, FOUL CREATURE!

KOBOR'S BATTLE CRY ECHOED DOWN THE TUNNEL ALONG WHICH JAI SCRAMBLED , TO BE ABRUPTLY SILENCED . . .
MASTER KOBOR! OH, NO . . .
THE TUNNEL TOOK JAI EVEN DEEPER, UNTIL FINALLY—
A VAST CAVERN! I PRAY THAT I WILL FIND A ROUTE TO THE OUTSIDE HERE.

BUT, AFTER JAI HAD EXPLORED EVERY PART OF THE CHAMBER.
IT'S NO USE! EVERY TUNNEL I'VE TRIED LEADS NOWHERE.
THEN . . .
BATS! THEY MAKE THIS PLACE THEIR HOME.
IF THEY CAN GET IN THEN I CAN GET OUT. *ACCH*— THIS WATER IS ICY!

THE CURRENT DREW JAI INTO THE TUNNEL, SWEEPING HIM AWAY FROM THE CAVERN.
SWORD HEAVY — *GULP* — BUT CERTAINLY NOT LEAVING IT — *CHOKE*!
THE CURRENT STRENGTHENED, THROWING JAI AGAINST THE TUNNEL WALL, CONTINUALLY, UNTIL —
UNGH . . .
DARKNESS ENGULFED HIM . . .
FAILED . . .

THEN, INEXPLICABLY, VIVID IMAGES FLOODED HIS MIND.
COME . . . COME TO ME . . .
THERE WAS THE BLACKNESS, FIRE IN HIS LUNGS, A BODY RACKED BY PAIN, THEN SUDDENLY, DAYLIGHT.
I . . . I'M ALIVE — I THINK . . .

PRESENTLY —
I KNOW NOT HOW I GOT HERE. BY SOME MIRACLE I SURVIVED. I MUST FIND OUT WHERE I AM AND HURRY TO WARN MY PEOPLE.

BUT AS JAI TURNED EASTWARD . . .
M-MY HEAD IS FULL OF PICTURES. TWIN MONOLITHS. A TREE ON A MOUNTAIN. I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

THEN, ON AN IMPULSE HE TURNED SOUTHWARD. THE PAIN LIFTED MIRACULOUSLY FROM HIS BODY.
NO PAIN WHEN I GO SOUTHWARD. I CAN'T FIGHT IT. I KNOW I MUST GO . . .

JAI TRAMPED THROUGH THE FOREST, UNTIL AT DUSK.
THE STONES — JUST AS MY MIND SAW THEM.

JAI CAMPED IN THE RUINS, SLEEPING ONLY FITFULLY AS HE TRIED TO FATHOM OUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO HIM.
SOMETHING DRAWS ME ONWARD... OR SOMEONE. I DIMLY REMEMBER THE FACE OF AN OLD MAN —

THE NEXT MORNING JAI PRESSED ON, FOLLOWING A TRAIL WHICH CUT THROUGH THE DENSE VEGETATION. SUDDENLY —
THANK GOODNESS I DETECTED THEIR APPROACH IN TIME TO CONCEAL MYSELF. I HAVE NEVER SEEN THEIR LIKE BEFORE.

ALL BUT ONE OF THE MAN-APES PADDED PAST JAI'S HIDING PLACE —
SNIFF — SNIFF — HMMMMM . . .

THE MAN-APE SUDDENLY LUNGED —
GNRRRR!
ARGH!

URGH!

EVEN IF OUR FIGHT WASN'T HEARD, MY ADVERSARY WILL EVENTUALLY BE MISSED BY HIS FELLOWS, AND THEN . . .
JAI SPED ALONG THE TRAIL, ANXIOUS TO PUT AS MUCH DISTANCE AS POSSIBLE BETWEEN THEM.
THEY COME. THE HUNT IS ON . . .
I CANNOT OUTDISTANCE THEM. MY ONLY CHANCE LIES IN OUTFOXING THEM. THAT WON'T BE EASY.

LATER THAT DAY —
THEY ARE TENACIOUS. NOTHING I DO THROWS THEM OFF THE SCENT. MUST KEEP GOING — SOMEHOW . . .
OO . . . OO . . . OO!
SOON —
MY WAY LIES YONDER. MY DESTINATION IS NEAR — I FEEL IT. YET I AM EXHAUSTED. THE HAIRY ONES WILL SOON OVERHAUL ME. I AM FINISHED.

AT THAT MOMENT THE SKY DARKENED AND THE FOREST WAS BUFFETTED BY A SQUALL.
THIS STORM CAME FROM NOWHERE. IT HAS SAVED MY LIFE. ALL TRACE OF MY PASSING IS BEING WASHED AWAY.
BACK BENT AGAINST THE STORM, JAI CONTINUED TO CLIMB, UNTIL —
THAT STRANGE TREE AND EVEN STRANGER DWELLING WITH IT. IS THIS THE END OF MY JOURNEY?

NO PATH LED UP TO THE PLACE, YET THE WEARY YOUTH MANAGED TO COAX HIS BODY TO CLIMB THE PRECIPITOUS SLOPES.

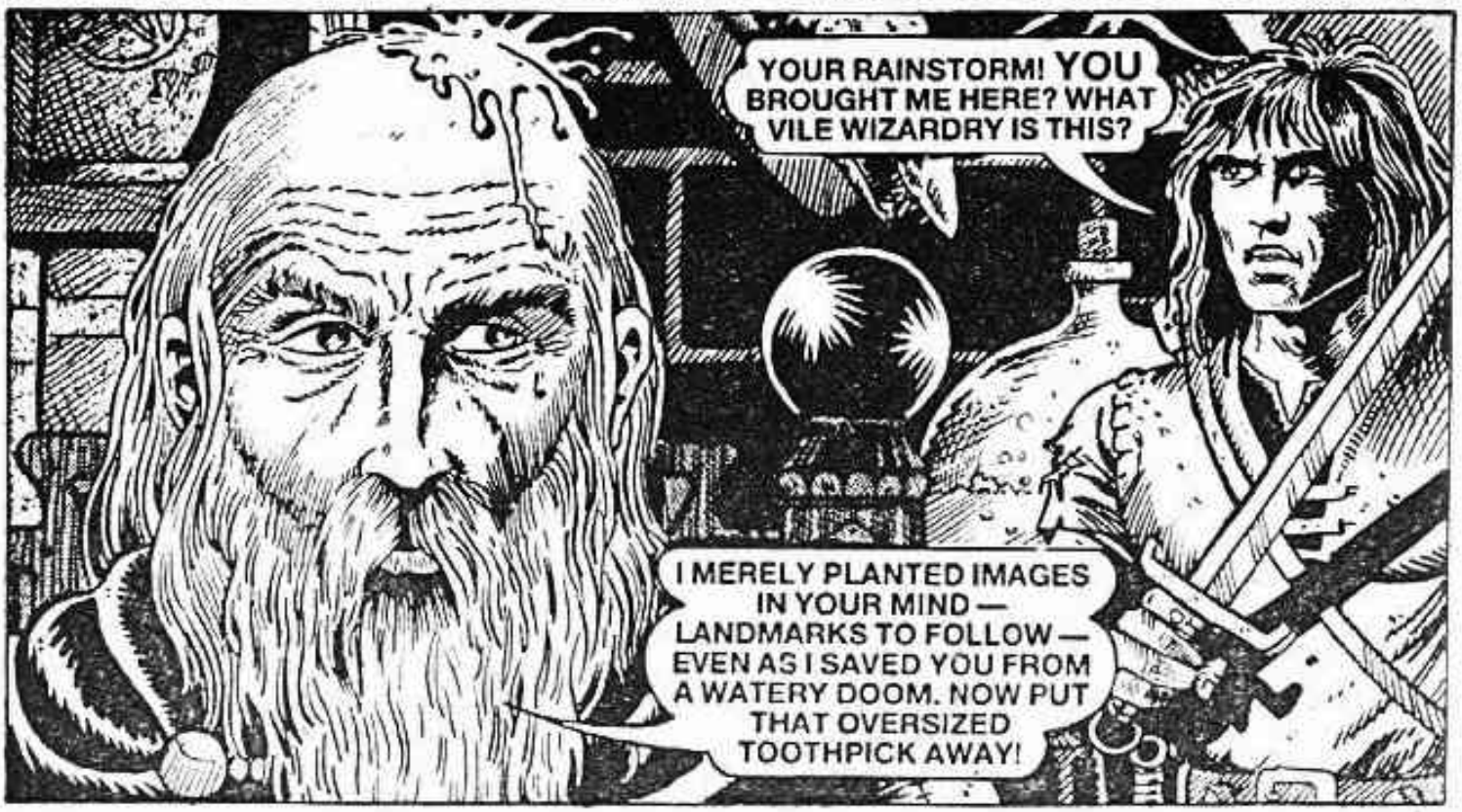
MADE IT! YET THIS BUILDING SEEMS TO BE DESERTED — DERELICT.

THE ANCIENT DOOR GROANED OPEN —

HELLO! IS THERE ANYBODY THERE — *ARGH!*

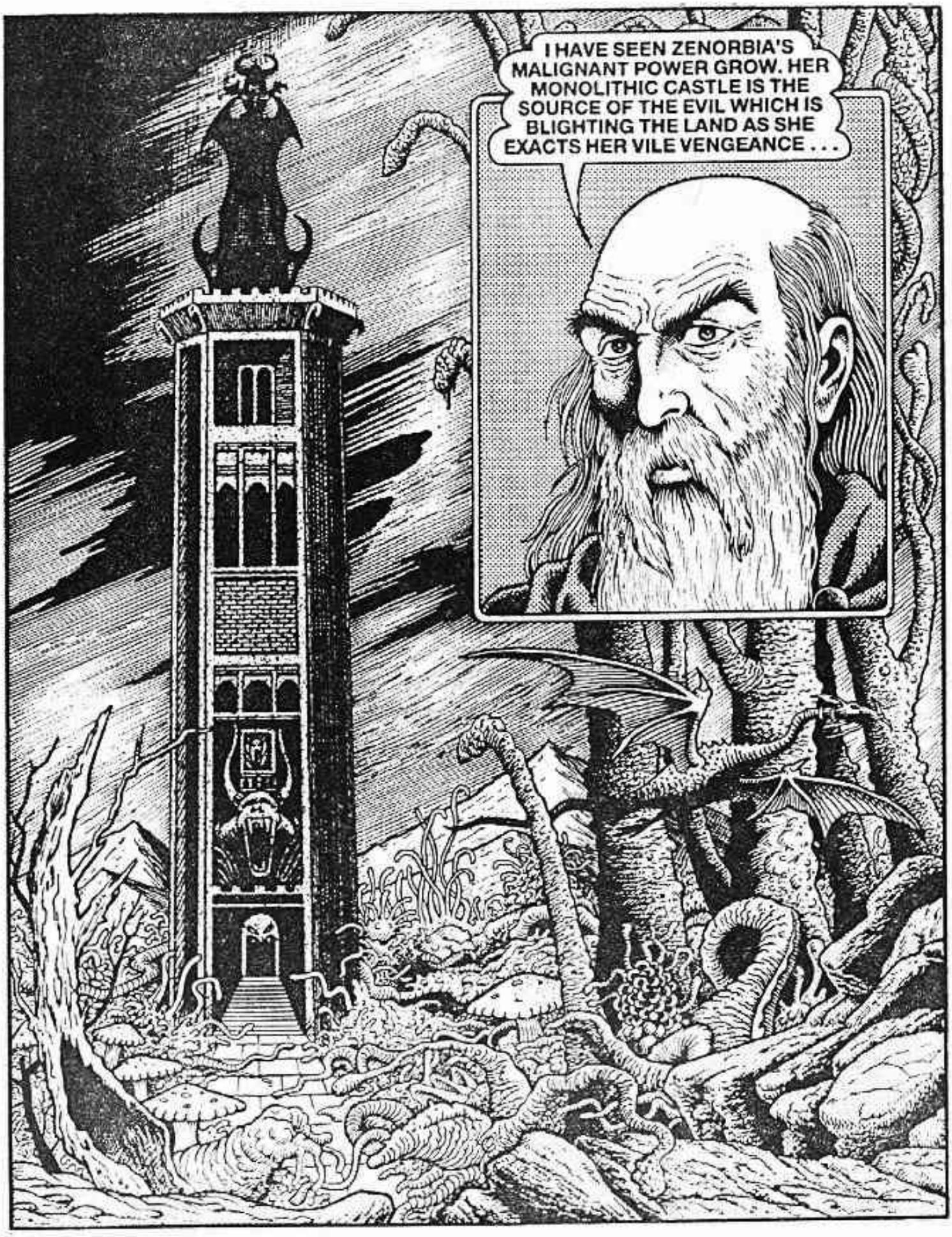
Caw-caawwww.

CURSES! MY RAIN STORM PUT PAID TO YOUR PURSUERS YET IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN CONFINED TO THE FOREST. CONFOUND THIS ROOF. SEE HOW MUCH TROUBLE I HAVE GONE TO IN ORDER TO BRING YOU HERE. YOU'D BETTER BE WORTH IT, LAD!


YOUR RAINSTORM! YOU BROUGHT ME HERE? WHAT VILE WIZARDRY IS THIS?
I MERELY PLANTED IMAGES IN YOUR MIND — LANDMARKS TO FOLLOW — EVEN AS I SAVED YOU FROM A WATERY DOOM. NOW PUT THAT OVERSIZED TOOTHPICK AWAY!

BUT JAI TIGHTENED THE GRIP ON HIS SWORD.
STAND FAST, I SAY. AS A PRACTITIONER OF THE DARK ARTS, YOU MUST BE MY ENEMY. MY ANCESTORS FOUGHT HARD TO RID THE LAND OF YOUR KIND.
FIDDLE-FADDLE! THE CRAFT I PLY CAN BE USED FOR GOOD OR EVIL. IT IS MERELY A TOOL. NOW SIT DOWN AND LISTEN.
JAI WATCHED AS IMAGES APPEARED IN THE MAGICIAN'S MIRROR—
SEE, THIS IS HOW THE MALIGNANT FORCE WAS UNLEASHED. LONG AGO, WHEN THE DARK ONES WERE DEFEATED, THE WITCH QUEEN, ZENORBIA, WAS IMPRISONED IN A SECRET VAULT. BUT, NOT MANY MOONS AGO, THE TOMB WAS DISCOVERED BY THIEVES. WHEN THEY OPENED IT . . .

FREE AT LAST! YOUR REWARD FOR THAT SERVICE IS THE HONOUR OF RELINQUISHING YOUR VERY LIFEFORCE TO SATISFY MY AWAKENED HUNGER.
NO, NOOOO! AIEEEE!


I HAVE SEEN ZENORBIA'S MALIGNANT POWER GROW. HER MONOLITHIC CASTLE IS THE SOURCE OF THE EVIL WHICH IS BLIGHTING THE LAND AS SHE EXACTS HER VILE VENGEANCE . . .

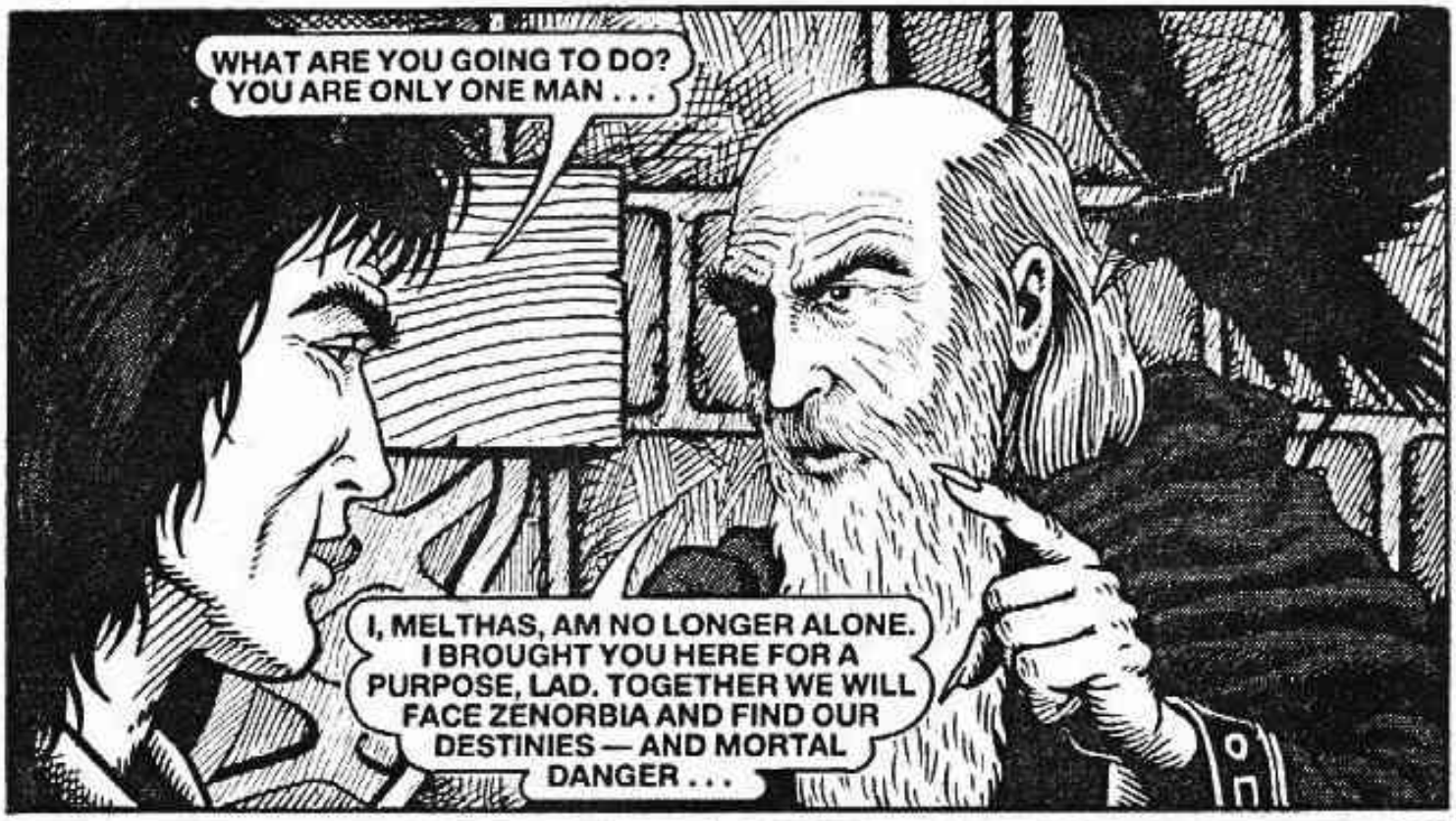
JAI WATCHED HORROR-STRUCK AT THE IMAGES IN THE MIRROR — SCENES OF CARNAGE AND DESTRUCTION, NOTHING ABLE TO HALT THE MARCH OF EVIL. FINALLY —
WHILST I FEAR I WOULD BE NO MATCH FOR HER POWER, I KNOW I MUST ACT NOW, BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE. SEE HOW EVEN NOW SHE HOLDS COURT . . .

SUDDENLY THE FIGURE TURNED AND THEY GAZED ON THE EVIL VISAGE OF ZENORBIA, QUEEN OF WITCHES.
I SENSE A PRESENCE — SOMEONE WATCHING . . . A FELLOW ADEPT WHO DARES TO INTERFERE, EH?

FEEL MY POWER. HA-HA-HAAA! . . . YOU THINK YOU CAN DEFY ME?
MY MIND IS CLOUDING — CAN'T THINK — CAN'T RETALIATE — AAGHH!
THE MEANS BY WHICH THE OLD MAN SPIED ON THE WITCH QUEEN GIVES HER A WAY OF ATTACKING HIM. MAYBE IF I —

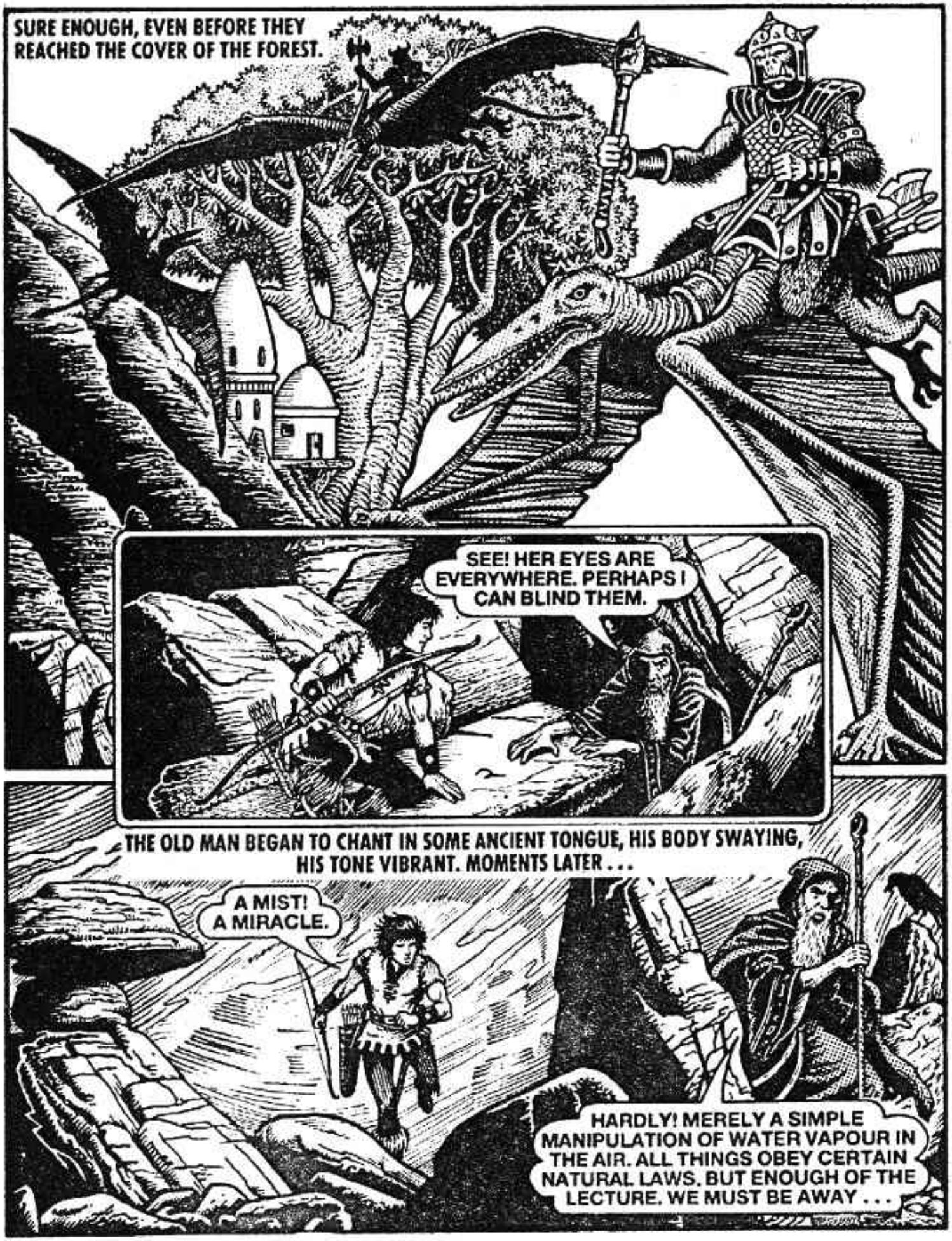
JAI HURLED THE STOOL AT THE MIRROR WITH ALL HIS STRENGTH.
NOOOO!
IT — IT WORKED. I HAVE BROKEN THE WOMAN'S LINK WITH THIS PLACE.

WITHIN SECONDS, THE ROOM WAS STILL.
I FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE THAT A HUMAN MIND CAN UNLEASH SUCH FORCES . . .
SHE DRAWS HER POWER FROM THE DARK ONES, WITH WHOM SHE HAS A PACT. HER STRENGTH GROWS WITH EVERY MOMENT SO THERE IS NO TIME TO LOSE.


WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO? YOU ARE ONLY ONE MAN . . .
I, MELTHAS, AM NO LONGER ALONE. I BROUGHT YOU HERE FOR A PURPOSE, LAD. TOGETHER WE WILL FACE ZENORBIA AND FIND OUR DESTINIES — AND MORTAL DANGER . . .

WITHOUT FURTHER EXPLANATION MELTHAS TOOK JAI FROM THE KEEP.
TAKE THIS BOW AND SHAFTS. THE ARROW BARBS ARE TAINTED WITH DEADLY VENOM. CONCENTRATE ON THE TARGET AND THEY WILL FLY TRUE.

PRESENTLY —
I DON'T UNDERSTAND. WHY ME?
YOU CANNOT GUESS? PAH — NO MATTER. BUT EVEN NOW ZENORBIA'S VILE HORDES WILL BE SEARCHING FOR US. LETTING HER DETECT ME WAS A BAD MISTAKE. WE HAVE LOST THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE.


SURE ENOUGH, EVEN BEFORE THEY REACHED THE COVER OF THE FOREST.
SEE! HER EYES ARE EVERYWHERE. PERHAPS I CAN BLIND THEM.
THE OLD MAN BEGAN TO CHANT IN SOME ANCIENT TONGUE, HIS BODY SWAYING, HIS TONE VIBRANT. MOMENTS LATER . . .
A MIST! A MIRACLE.
HARDLY! MERELY A SIMPLE MANIPULATION OF WATER VAPOUR IN THE AIR. ALL THINGS OBEY CERTAIN NATURAL LAWS. BUT ENOUGH OF THE LECTURE. WE MUST BE AWAY . . .

BUT ZENORBIA'S POWERS WERE AWESOME!
THERE IS A STRANGE POWER IN THE AIR — COILED LIKE A SERPENT READY TO STRIKE. I MUST DESTROY THAT MEDDLING OLD FOOL AND THE CRETIN WHO FOLLOWS HIM. ATTACK, MINIONS. I WILL GUIDE YOU.
SECONDS LATER —
THEY'VE FOUND US.
I UNDERESTIMATED THE WITCH QUEEN'S POWER!

AS THEY CIRCLED AGAIN, HUNGRY FOR THE KILL, THOSE THEY HUNTED WERE READY FOR THEM.
FLY TRUE — BULLSEYE!
BE READY FOR THE OTHER BRUTE, JAI. I AM DOWNING HIS MOUNT, WITH GOOD REASON, AS YOU WILL SEE.

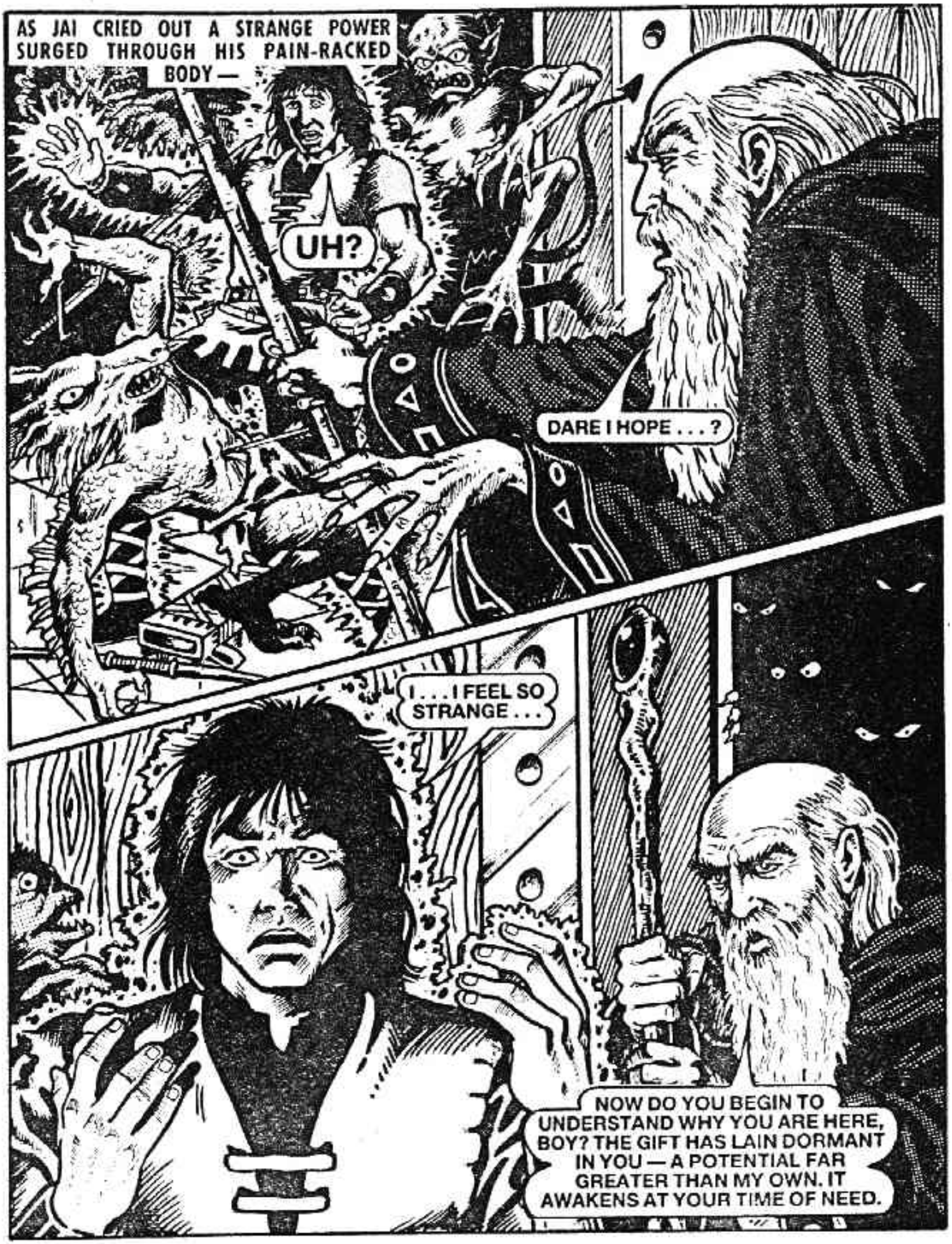
UUHHH — FEEL SO WEAK . . .
MELTHAS! LOOK OUT!
JAI LEAPED FORWARD, HIS BLADE WHISTLING AS IT SCYTHED THROUGH THE AIR.
KILLLLL!
GOOD GRIEF! THAT FACE!

MOMENTS LATER, JAI WATCHED INCREDULOUSLY AS MELTHAS STROKED THE LEATHERY SKIN OF THE FLYING LIZARD. IT STIRRED, AND —
STOP GAPING, LAD, AND CLIMB ON. I MERELY STUNNED THE BEAST AND NOW THAT MY STRENGTH HAS RETURNED IT WILL BE A SIMPLE TASK TO COMMAND IT.
THE RIDERS BORE CRYSTALS — I GLIMPSED HER FACE . . .
I KNOW. SHE SEES THROUGH THE CRYSTALS. NOW WE HAVE A SWIFT WAY OF TRAVELLING. A SPEEDIER WAY TO OUR DEATHS, I FEAR.
THEY SPED LOW THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN PASSES, AVOIDING A DIRECT ROUTE TO THEIR DESTINATION. FINALLY —
I FEEL SUCH EVIL IN THE AIR, MELTHAS. LIKE COLD FINGERS CLAWING AT MY SPINE. IT GETS STRONGER WITH EVERY MINUTE. I CAN HARDLY BEAR IT.
WE ARE NEARING THE SOURCE, JAI. LET YOUR MIND SEE A GLOWING SHIELD COVERING YOU, PROTECTING YOU. HAVE FAITH IN WHAT I SAY.

MEANWHILE —
I FEEL THAT STRANGE STIRRING IN THE ETHER AGAIN — BUT NO MATTER. THE OLD FOOL AND HIS PARTNER COME TO THEIR DOOM.
MELTHAS GUIDED THE CREATURE OVER THE DECAYED LANDSCAPE.
I FEEL STRANGE, MELTHAS, YET THE EVIL HAS CEASED TO CLAW AT ME. LOOK BELOW. SEE HOW ZENORBIA'S VILE MINIONS SWARM.

PRESENTLY —
IT'S A TRAP! EVERY FIBRE IN MY BODY SCREAMS THAT IT IS SO.
I KNOW, LAD. WE HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO REACH HERE UNHINDERED, SUCH IS THE WITCH QUEEN'S SURENESS SHE CAN DESTROY US. BE READY TO FACE EVIL INCARNATE.
THEY CREPT WARILY INTO THE TOWER, FOLLOWING A WINDING STAIRCASE TO A CHAMBER BELOW —
ZENORBIA! FACE TO FACE AT LAST.
WE BOTH KNOW YOU ARE NO MATCH FOR ME, OLD MAN, YET STILL YOU COME.

AT SOME UNSPOKEN COMMAND THE EVIL HORDE RUSHED FORWARD.
S . . . SO MANY OF THEM, WHATEVER THEY ARE —
THEY WERE ONCE MEN, CHANGED HORRIBLY BY ZENORBIA'S EVIL POWER, THUS WE DO THEM A FAVOUR BY PUTTING THEM OUT OF THEIR MISERY.
SHEER WEIGHT OF NUMBERS SEEMED CERTAIN TO PREVAIL —


AS JAI CRIED OUT A STRANGE POWER SURGED THROUGH HIS PAIN-RACKED BODY —
UH?
DARE I HOPE . . . ?
I . . . I FEEL SO STRANGE . . .
NOW DO YOU BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND WHY YOU ARE HERE, BOY? THE GIFT HAS LAIN DORMANT IN YOU — A POTENTIAL FAR GREATER THAN MY OWN. IT AWAKENS AT YOUR TIME OF NEED.

THE WITCH QUEEN STRUCK OUT WITH ALL HER FORCE.
HEED ME — AARGH!
SO, HE HAS THE GIFT. YET IT WILL AVAIL YOU NOTHING. DIE!
YOUR POWER IS RAW — UNCHANNELLED — NOT SUBJECT TO YOUR WILL. YOU ARE NO THREAT TO ME! HA, HA.
ONE — LAST — HOPE . . .
HIS LIFE EBBING FAST, MELTHAS GRABBED THE BOY, AND —

WHAT I HAVE — MY YEARS OF WORK ARE NOW YOURS . . . KNOW WHAT I KNOW, JAI. USE IT WELL . . .
MIND . . . FLOODED . . . ACCHHH . . .

MOMENTS LATER —
MY HEAD! PACKED TO BURSTING . . .
YOU ARE NO MATCH FOR AN ADEPT SUCH AS I. PREPARE TO SUFFER, BOY. HORRIBLY . . .
THE DEADLY COILS OF THE PSYCHIC SERPENT COILED AROUND HIM, AND TIGHTENED.
HOW DO I DEFEAT AN ADEPT? I AM NO MATCH FOR HER SKILL AND EXPERIENCE — YET . . .
BY THE DEMONS OF . . . !
YOU WERE FOOLED BY MY PSYCHIC DOUBLE, ZENORBIA. A MISTAKE YOU'LL PAY FOR DEARLY.

YOUR ACROBATICS WILL NOT SPARE YOU FOR LONG, CRETIN!
IT WORKED! THE IMAGE I HAVE CREATED HAS CONFUSED AND DISORIENTATED HER. I HAVE INHERITED MELTHAS' KNOWLEDGE. I MUST NOT FAIL HIM.

JAI CONCENTRATED, THEN LOOSED A BOLT OF ENERGY.
CLEVER, BUT NOT CLEVER ENOUGH! *HA, HA.* I CAN DESTROY FLESH AS EASILY AS AN ILLUSION.

BUT FIRST GAZE IF YOU DARE ON THE TRUE FACE OF ZENORBIA.
MUST CONCENTRATE MY POWER. MERE STEEL CANNOT HARM THIS CREATURE, YET PERHAPS A BLADE FASHIONED OF SORCERY WILL PREVAIL.

EVEN AS ZENORBIA COMPLETED HER DEMONAIC METAMORPHOSIS, JAI LEAPED TO THE ATTACK.
THE SHAPE CHANGE HAS WEAKENED HER. IT'S NOW OR NEVER . . .
AAARGH!
REFLEXES BORN OF WARRIOR TRAINING BROUGHT JAI BACK TO THE ATTACK.
MY BLADE BITES DEEP.
NOOOO. I MUST HAVE MY REVENGE.

A HORRENDOUS SCREECH REVERBERATED AROUND THE CHAMBER.
SCREECH!
TASTE SWORD AND SORCERY, WITCH QUEEN! YOUR EVIL REIGN IS AT AN END.

THE HUGE BODY SHUDDERED AND WAS STILL. ALL AROUND, ZENORBIA'S MINIONS FELL WRITHING IN THE THROES OF DEATH.
HER POWER OVER THE LAND AND ITS CREATURES IS GONE. THOSE IT TAINTED DECAY BEFORE MY EYES. MUST GET OUT OF HERE.

LATER —
BOTH MY MENTORS ARE NOW DEAD. THE WARRIOR AND THE WIZARD. I LEARNED MUCH FROM THEM. BUT WHAT NOW AM I?
SEVERAL DAYS LATER AS JAI JOURNEYED HOMEWARDS THROUGH A FAMILIAR FOREST . . .
HELLO, MY FRIEND! OUR PATHS CROSS AGAIN.
THE HUGE BEAST THUNDERED TOWARDS JAI, WHO STOOD CALMLY IN ITS PATH.
THIS TIME WE HAVE NO QUARREL. GO IN PEACE.

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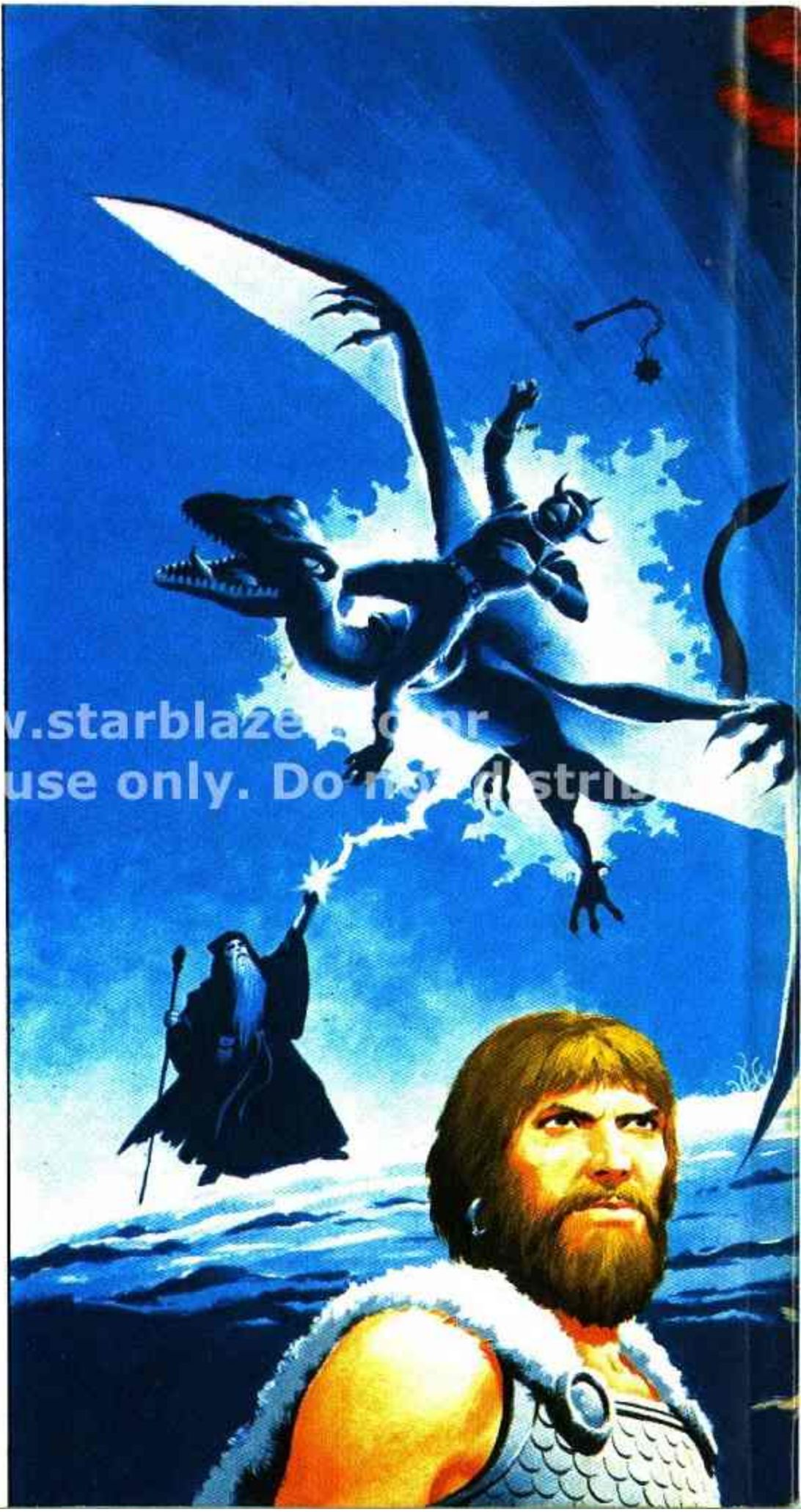

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